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ABSTRACT

To investigate the factors behind the overall lack of success of televised public service announcements (PSAs), five Marine recruitment PSAs were studied using 138 college undergraduate students (75% male and 90% freshmen and sophomores). Results indicated the following: in general, the PSA messages were perceived as alienating by the students; specific military features had no alienating effect; the PSAs were too old; the PSAs created false impressions that could be expected to negatively affect recruitment; and the PSAs failed to "get to the point." It was concluded that PSAs apparently offered too few positive elements when weighted against the specific changes they were intended to effect. (Study data and specific production recommendations are appended.) (DF)

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PRE-PRODUCTION PLANNING FOR PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS: A CASE STUDY

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The general problem being investigated is the overall lack of success that public service advertising or announcements have enjoyed in the history of television. There is a fundamental misconception which seems to form the basis for the production of public service announcements: essentially conventional wisdom has made an artificial and erroneous distinction between the so-called "Public Service Announcement" and the straight "commercial".

Public Service Announcements (PSA'S) are a frequent form of broadcast advertisement; messages appear along with ads for products and services. These messages are developed by a variety of sources, for one of the common traits and perhaps common faults of the psa's are that they are provided to the station by the source of the message. Among the originators of psa's are: religious, governmental, philanthropic and health/disease related organizations. While psa's appear literally in the thousands on a regular basis, they are substantially different from their counterpart commercials in that they are prepared almost exclusively on the basis of copywriters intuitions rather than rigorous research and pre-testing. Most of the full service advertising agency leaders successfully market their services by selling the total research effort to maximize the dollar return on their client's financial investment. Public service messages should be no different in this regard; the same standards of production should prevail. Unfortunately research into the effectiveness of the psa has not really advanced since the 1973 lament of Hanneman that it was virtually non-existent.[1]

Organizations such as the American Cancer Society, the Heart Association, Multiple Sclerosis, the March of Dimes, etc., depend heavily on charitable contributions from the public. They also seek to create awareness for their causes and to inform the public of their problems and the need for concern

sympathy and preventative action (where appropriate). Psa's try to acomplish a great deal, yet the degree to which they succeed or fail because of or in spite of themselves is largely unknown. Yet the public service sector should be most interested in how to improve the content and or format (approach) in their messages to maximize their effectiveness in reaching their informational and behavioral objectives.

Research in the area of public service messages is sparse. Much of what is available concerns the role of psa's in the program structure[2], or content analysis work on structure and content of the messages.[3] All to frequently the announcements are of such poor quality that the audience is readily cued in to the fact that the next message is some type of non-commercial appeal.[4] PSA's tend to rely heavily on personalities and fear/threat campaigns. It would seem that the copywriter has decided to adapt these concepts because of the measure of success they have enjoyed in commercial advertising, "if it works for them, its got to work for us" seems to be the mentality. There is a large body of advertising research that the psa producer would do well to familiarize himself with. For instance, despite the care with which the literature indicates must be taken when utilizing a fear/threat campaign in order to minimize the backlash effect, producers of psa's seem determined to scare people into using seat belts and giving up cigarettes.

Although Hanneman and McEwen have made a sensible call for systematic audience research[5] and our body of knowledge repeatedly reminds us that people will be most attentive to information congenial to their belief systems, the psa producer continues to operate out of his hip pocket and wonder why his fellow man doesn't want to live longer, better, have a successful career, help his fellow man or save mother earth. An excellent example of a poorly done campaign for a good cause, is the

national effort to reduce cigarette smoking. O'Keefe's research indicates that only people inclined to give up smoking anyway admitted to being influenced by the spots, that non-smokers saw them as most effective and that smokers who weren't going to modify their behavior would not deny the health message, but were willing to live with the dissonance.[6]

No rigorous systematic development testing occurs, to say nothing of follow up research. Given funding for developmental (formative) research and spot construction and subsequent effectiveness studies (summative research), a great deal could be done to deliver more predictably on various subjects.

Health related or orientated groups are not the only ones who have a stake in knowing more about effectively maximizing the achievement of various informational and behavioral objectives advanced in psa's. The Enviornmental Protection Agency, The Department of Transportation, public broadcasters and recruiters to name just a few have much to gain through an expansion of this scant body of knowledge. As a specific example, all would like to see the public's energy consumption patterns altered, rather than the current high levels of usage and continued increases in usage in the face of dwindling supplies and rising prices. Despite the energy crunch brought on by foreign developments and unusually cold winters, energy consumption continues to rise: big car sales have never been better, motorists and ignoring the 55mph speed limit, gasoline consumption continues to go up. Much of the consumer's behavior remains unaffected while we are reminded by pro atheletes and others not to be "fuelish".

The central questions are: Can the psa perform a meaningful role in conveying information to the general public? What techniques should be employed to advance the state of art from intuition and good intentions, to a process that offers some chance of competing for the attention of the viewer?

If clients who deal with advertising agencies want and

demand rigorous testing to maximize the return on their investment, why should public service agencies be any different? The argument that there is a perpetual shortage of money is valid but cannot be the overiding factor and constant excuse for "business as usual". Public and private noncommercial message sources are selling something far more important than sex appeal and clean shirts. They are 'selling' good health, not its illusion, a cleaner environment, not a cleaner tub, prospects for a fundamental improvement in lifestyle and career, not "you too can be a .....in just six short weeks, VA approved".

THE PROJECT

Each Marine Corps recruiting district is provided with budgetary resources for advertising and recruiting. They are also provided with psa spots by Headquarters which they endeavor to have telecast on stations in their area. The Officer Selection Officer (OSO) for the Houston, Texas area contacted the Department of Communications, now the School of Communications of the University of Houston for assistance in producing public service announcements tailored for the southwestern part of the United States. Recruiters for all branches of the service depend heavily upon psa type material in their radio and television efforts. The commitment on the part of the Marine Corps represented their first attempt to produce psa material on a local basis. The advanced cinematography class accepted this challenge to be involved in the actual production of material intended for widespread dissemination. Specifically, the charge accepted was to produce 60 seconds of broadcast quality, psa material, with soundtrack. The project would be done on film for greater quality and transferred to tape. The widest possible latitude was offered by the Marine Corps. Essentially, the one limitation was that the theme had to be consistent with the Marine philosophy that they want only "few good men" and "everyone can't be a Marine", however these specific phrases were not

mandated as being necessary parts of the audio, merely the spirit they represented. The concern of Marine officials, both on that national and local level was that the end product could not be along the lines of "The Marines Want You" or "Join the People Who Have Joined the Marines" etc.

The target audience for the commercial was college men. The message was to inform and encourage them to join the Marine Corps' "Platoon Leaders Class" program. The PLC allows students to participate in a commisioning progran in which they recieve military training during the summer and makes them eligible for a commission as a second lieutenant upon graduation. The program does not obligate the student in anyway until he accepts his commission.

FUNDING:

The Marine Corps made available $1500 to cover production costs. The Office of Research Development of the University of Houston made available through the Limited Grant in Aid Program, LGIA, an additional $500. The total funding of $2000 is approximately 20% of the usual costs incurred by the Marine Corps in PSA/commercial production.

METHODOLOGY

It was determined to produce the psa in light of some of the problems traditionally encountered by groups seeking to affect change or information gain through public service material. Since it was known that the psa's being provided by headquarters and used in Houston were ineffective, the first step was to evaluate the old material.

Copies of five public service announcements in use were provided for research purposes. They were entitled: "Mess Night", "Drill Team", "Tailor Shop" (a long and short version), "Graduation" and "The Harrier" (a unique vertical takeoff and landing plane). The spots were screened before an audience of 138 college students, 75% male and 90% freshmen and sophomore

students, this of course is the age group which is of primary interest as the target audience.

Prior to this screening session, the films were studied and the most prominent and often used words were determined: few, good, gold, green, challenge, club, career, red, leadership, responsibility, physical, man, uniform, enjoy, officer, march, drill white, precision, leader and graduation. The audience was asked to evaluate each word as "positive" or "negative" on a nine point, semantic differential scale. This evaluation was done before the spots were screened and without the audience knowing the content.

The students then saw each PSA and answered 5 openend questions on each (Appendix A). The answers were then coded into eight categories for all the messages except the "Harrier" which had only four possible answer codes, (Appendix B). After seeing the PSA's the same semantic differential scale was readministered. The ratings were tabulated and correlational analysis was run for interrelationships between words. The answers to the questions on each message were also tabulated. Additionally, the following determinations were made for each psa: most objectionable aspect, least objectionable aspect, most positive aspect, least positive aspect.

As a final method of pre-production analysis, a focus group of 15 college students had each spot screened for them and a very free discussion was encouraged and then a more directed conversation.

SPECIFIC RESULTS BY PSA

"Mess Night"

Actual content: Mess night is a very formal diner held on a yearly basis by various Marine Commands. The spot opened with Marines in fulldress uniform, entering a dining room and sitting around a "U" shaped table. There were toasts, discussions, cigars, etc., while a narrator explained what an important part of Marine

tradition such ceremonies were.

Analysis: This was the most poorly received message. The traditions portrayed had no relevance to college students. The spot received an overall negative rating of 61% (the total percentage of all responses which were negative). During the focus group comments were made concerning the abscence of women at the party, power symbols (large cigars) and the possible misappropriation of government funds to stage these events in the first place. After the discussion, this psa was referred to as "The Knights of the Roundtable". The feeling was that this spot alienated the audience, they could not place themselves in that setting.

"Tailor Shop" (long and short versions)

Actual Content: the psa opens in a Marine tailor shop where a new officer is being fitted for his dress blues. The theme of the message is summed up by the narrator's words: "The Marine uniform comes in all sizes, but doesn't fit everyone". There are numerous shots of training in the PLC and the physical and mental demands it places on officer candidates.

Analysis: Again, there was an overall feeling of alienation and a total negative rating of 69%. However, this was not deemed to be the most poorly received message because of the many favorable remarks offered about the action and competition which were portrayed. The focus group was impressed with the line about the uniform comes in all sizes but doesn't fit everyone. The competitive nature of the training was also viewed with favor. Note was made of the fact that it was very obvious that one of the PLC candidates shown in the spots was wearing a wedding ring. None of the Marine officials involved in the project or contacted could say whether this was deliberate or accidental, regardless, it conveyed a message to married students.

"Graduation"

Actual Content: A graduation ceremony was depicted, complete

with ivy covered halls, caps and gowns and university officials. One of the degree receipients was a newly commissioned Marine.

Analysis: The audience and focus group generally liked this commercial because of its association with graduation and employment. The total negative rating was only 48%. However, they did feel it was somewhat unrealistic because the ceremony looked like it could have taken place in Harvard Yard and not in the Southwest.

"Drill Team"

Actual content: a ten second spot showing a crack Marine enlisted drill team; the visuals included the throwing and catching of rifles.

Analysis: This psa was seen as quite interesting because of the action portrayed, but totally irrelevant to the recruiting of officers and far too short. Overall negative rating: 52%

"The Harrier"

Actual content: the Harrier is a special type of tactical airplane used only in the United States by the Marine Corps. Its unique feature is that it takes off straight up like a helicopter, but is a fixed-wing, jet fighter. The commercial showed the plane and indicated that the Marines needed pilots.

Analysis: "The Harrier" was very well received which is not surprising given the nature of the plane and the desire that people have to fly. The respondents made the following observations: 1. few Marines fly and 2. even fewer fly that plane. The focus group didn't consider that a deception, but merely a fact of life. However, that observation was not a fact of life; at that time one-third of all new Marine officers were needed for pilot and flight officer status. The Marine Corps was creating a false impression which was hurting their recruiting cause.

OVERALL RESULTS

The general screening audience and the focus group consistently

indicated that the psa recruitment messages alienated them. Rather than saying "we want you", they felt they were being told "you can't be one of us". The fact that these were messages for a military organization, perhaps the most military in this country, was not seen as a negative factor, neither was the short cropped haircut ever mentioned as a factor which would mediate against being a Marine.

Additionally, it was discovered that the spots were seven years old. Material produced in 1970-71 was being used to encourage contemporary college students to enlist in the Marine Corps. No commercial advertiser would use seven year old commercials.

The commercials were creating false impressions that were actually hurting recruitment: misappropriation of funds, too few Marines fly etc.

The messages were designed by career Marine officers and not surprisingly this group felt that the material was extremely effective and moving. In this, as in other respects, the recruiting psa's were no different from other types.

Despite these factors, the single major flaw has to be that after seeing these spots, neither the general survey audience nor the focus group had any idea what the Platoon Leaders Class (PLC) is all about. Nowhere in any of the six public service announcements is Platoon Leaders Class or PLC ever mentioned. One of the spots, "Drill Team" doesn't even have an officer appear in it or mention commissioning opportunities. The other five are clearly for officer candidates, but never mention that the Corps has a commissioning program that you can fit in between academic years while acquiring no military obligation. These public service announcements never got to the point!

There were, however, some positive discoveries. Hair was not perceived as an impediment to joining. The messages stressed several factors which were extremely well received by the

audience: action, competition, graduation and employment. The technical quality of the film was commented upon most favorably. The statement was made through the wedding ring that a married person could participate in the program, though it wasn't clear whether or not this was deliberate. On the semantic differential scale the positve ratings of the words green, career, leadership, responsibility, physical and gold all increased significantly on the post screening evaluation. The rating for officer remained the same.

The number of significant positive intercorrelations between the key words increased from 135 on the pretest to 225 on the postest. Apparently there were strong elements of a cohesive message unit.

CONCLUSION

Most of the fundamental errors committed by psa producers were in evidence in these recruiting messages. They were designed on the basis of intuition. They appealed most strongly to those to were already Marines. They were not constructed for the specific audience that they were intended to influence. They created dissonance in the audience which they could handle with escape behavior. In general, messages were created with the intention that they would influence people to at least consider making a extremely difficult and demanding career change and although there were some positive elements, the audience's general reaction was "this is not not for me, they don't want me".

The public service message is asking too much of its viewer to allow it to continue to be produced in this fashion. These errors are not limited to the military. What little research there is supports the general conclusions that the public service announcement continues to be a shot in the dark. Continued production and utilization of the psa in this manner will continue to produce the same results.

The recomendations made and used in producing the local psa are contained in Appendix E.

NOTES

[1] Gerhard J. Hanneman, William J. McEwen and Sharon Coyne, "Public Service Advertising on Television", Journal of Broadcasting, Fall, 1973, p. 387

[2] Ibid. pp. 392-394

[3] Gerhard J. Hanneman and William J. McEwen, "Television Drug Use Appeals: A Content Analysis", Journalism Quarterly, Summer, 1973, pp. 329-333

[4] Hanneman, McEwen and Coyne, p. 400

[5] Hanneman and McEwen, p. 333

[6] M.T. O'Keefe, "The Anti-Smoking Commercials: A Study of Television's Impact on Behavior", Public Opinion Quarterly, 1971, 35, pp. 242-248

[7] Leon S. Robertson, "The Great Seat Belt Campaign Flop", Journal of Communication, Autumn, 1976, pp. 41-45

APPENDIX A

1. What in this commercial appealed to you?

2. Does this commercial suggest a way that you could fulfill a personal need?

3. Does this commercial suggest anything that you would like to do, but also suggest obstacles to participation? What?

4. Did you enjoy watching this commercial? Why?

5. What did you this like about this commercial?

The intent of the questions was to have a prime target audience evaluate the content without directly asking the question "Why don't you want to be a Marine after seeing these spots?" Therefore, members of the general survey could comment on favorable as well as unfavorable aspects without becoming defensive.

APPENDIX B

Answer codes for questions on "Tailor Shop", "Mess Night", "Graduation" and "Drill Team".

1. unspecified negative response
2. unspecified positive response
3. comments on the "competition" or "action"
4. alienation
5. unrealistic
6. responses connected with the prescence of a Marine
7. comments on the photography or music
8. the portrayal of graduation, suggestion of employment

Answer code for "The Harrier"

1. answer referring to the plane.
2. answer referring to flying
3. negative responses
4. unrealistic

APPENDIX C

Some specific ratings and findings.

"Mess Night"
Total negative response: 61%
Most objectionable aspect: alienation/unrealistic
Most positive aspect: photography

"Tailor Shop" (long version)
Total negative response: 69%
Most objectionable aspect: alienation
Most positive aspect: action/competition

"Tailor Shop" (short version)
Total negative response: 67%
Most objectionable aspect: alienation
Most positive aspect: photography/music

"Graduation"
Total negative response: 52%
Most objectionable aspect: unrealistic
Most positive aspect: graduation

"The Harrier"
Total negative response: 28%
Most objectionable aspect: unrealistic
Most positive aspect: the plane itself

"Drill Team"
Total negative response: 61%
Most objectionable aspect: too short/irrelevant
Most positive aspect: action

N=138

APPENDIX D

Pre and postest viewing means - semantic differential scale. negative (0) to positive (9)

word	pretest	postest
few	7.3	3.9*
good	5.9	5.8
green	5.9	6.1*
challenge	7.5	4.7*
club	7.6	5.6*
career	6.9	7.1*
red	7.1	5.7*
leadership	4.9	6.5*
responsibility	5.9	6.8*
physical	4.0	5.7*
man	3.7	3.0
blue	5.8	5.4*
uniform	6.3	5.7*
enjoy	6.8	6.0*
officer	7.0	7.1
gold	6.1	6.9*

* Sig. mean difference

N=138 $p = < .05$

APPENDIX E

Production Recommendations

The following recomendations were made and utilized:

1. produce the spot using University of Houston settings.
2. using 'action' footage
3. eliminate all the negatively rated words.
4. crosscut between action scenes and campus scenes
5. create an upbeat/challenge atmosphere

These concepts were employed in producing two spots, one of sixty seconds and one of thirty seconds. The theme was stated in the opening lines of each: "Is this for you?"

The public service announcements produced are being shown in eleven states; military bureaucracy is hindering is spread to other recruiting districts, however, the Marines anticipate that this problem will be overcome. According to Capt. John Hill, OSO Officer and Liason Officer for the project, the "800" phone number is heavily utilized by members of the audience after each showing. Although the final results are not yet in, the PLC yearly quota for the Houston District was filled within three months after the spot was first aired. There is a need for follow up research to empirically evaluate these results. Unfortunately, another prolem of conventional wisdom comes to bear in this situation: the message source is content with the results and therefore research funds have not yet been indentified to verify the results.

On February 3, 1978, the principal investigator for this project accepted on behalf of the project participants an "Award of Merit", from Headquarters, United States Marine Corps for this project.